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JSO and joint fires

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SOF AND JOINT FIRES

The integration of Joint Fires across the spectrum of conflict in special operations is an important issue because of SOF operations character evolution and closer cooperation with conventional forces. This paper summarizes SOF capabilities to employ Joint Fires and provide short review how Joint Fires support SOF core tasks. Based on this summary there is possible way of future SOF Joint Fires integration

Based on SOF fundamentals Special Operations Forces are not equipped with integral fire support assets and rely on support provided by conventional forces. "Nonorganic fire support assets include CAS from U.S. and Coalition fixed wing aircraft, indirect fire support from 105-mm, 155-mm and High-Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems/Multiple-Launch Rocket Systems, attack helicopters and now armed unmanned aerial vehicles such as the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper."¹ CAS is the main supporting asset because of its capability to bring large weapon load for long distance in timely manner and CAS is very precise. "CAS accounts for the vast majority of fire support assets provided to an ODA due to the distances required and limited availability of the other fire support platforms."² One problem connected with CAS is its limited on station time, and it is demanding to ensure sufficient coverage for extended time periods. Another limitation is weather over target area or in vicinity of airfield servicing CAS platforms. Next asset available is conventional artillery with spectrum of long range rocket systems, guns and mortars. Even though artillery was not very popular asset within SOF community the lessons learned proved that situation is changing and artillery is used more and more. "but, suffice it to say, there are field experiences of improving the integration of Fires, especially precision fires, with SOF that are very encouraging. One must be especially pleased with the use of long-range, precision fires and the capabilities of High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) to

support SOF. The mobility of HIMARS and the advantages of its long-range, precision munitions have been recognized and cleverly employed by SOF.”³ Furthermore artillery assets are available twenty four hours a day and there is no weather limitation and no difficulties with sortie generation, on station time or attrition rates. Except rocket systems the disadvantage of artillery assets is limited range of guns and mortars. Other limitation is accuracy of guns and mortars; however rocket systems like GMLRS and HIMARS are very precise weapons.

Despite the fact that all of those assets are available to support special operations there are not fully integrated fire support elements within SOF structure, and SOF utilize conventional fire support element chain. “No theater special operations commands have standing Joint Fires elements.”⁴ However SOF uses JTAC’s and liaison elements to cover the gap but this solution is not complete because the request chain is more complicated than a simple call for fire. There is the huge institution behind the scene and SOF representatives should cover all levels to deal with requests for fire support thus avoids complications. “No one in the headquarters could handle integration – incorporating joint fires in campaign planning, collating or submitting subordinate fires requests, and deconflicting operations. Though there was a special operations liaison element at air component level, the task force almost exclusively relied on liaison for deconfliction and integration. This resulted in limited success but was not the complete answer.”⁵

Evolution and joint character of operations leads towards integration of fire support elements providing expertise to incorporate Joint Fires into SOF campaign plan. Such fire support elements should be standing part of SOF headquarters. “One of the most important lessons learned by Army Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the War on Terrorism (WOT) was the need to integrate joint fires at all levels of operations.”⁶

Special operations are not any more exclusively limited to SOF and they are supported by conventional assets or conventional units and vice versa. This cooperation requires higher degree of coordination and cooperation however there are still specific tasks exclusive to SOF.

Following paragraphs describe how Joint Fires “defined as fires delivered during the employment of forces from two or more components in coordinated action to produce desired effects in support of a common objective”⁷ support SOF core tasks and small scale counterinsurgency. There are definitions of individual SOF core tasks and fire support assets most likely used to support those operations. Selection of fire support assets is based on general character of single tasks and may vary according to specific situation and conditions.

The first core task is Direct Action. “These are short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and which employ specialized military capabilities to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets. DA differs from conventional offensive actions in the level of physical and political risk, operational techniques, and the degree of discriminate and precise use of force to achieve specific objectives.”⁸ According to this definition the most likely fire support would be in form of CAS because of its accuracy and timely manner, but in specific situations when SOF conduct DA within range of artillery assets, those can be used as well. Especially in case of guided long range artillery assets like GMLRS or HIMARS. Those assets can be alternative to CAS.

The second core task is Special Reconnaissance. “These are reconnaissance and surveillance actions conducted as a special operation in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to collect or verify information of strategic or operational significance, employing military capabilities not normally found in conventional forces. These actions provide an

additive capability for commanders and supplement other conventional reconnaissance and surveillance actions.”⁹ This is the same instance as a DA. If situation allows to and Joint Fires are required to support SR operation then by pure definition only available asset would be CAS platform. Even though that CAS is main fire support tool, there may be conditions to use long range artillery. This conditions occur mainly when SOF conduct SR simultaneously with conventional force operations within range of artillery assets.

The third core task is Foreign Internal Defense. “These are operations that involve participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization, to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. SOF’s primary role in this interagency activity is to assess, train, advise, and assist host nation military and paramilitary forces with the tasks that require their unique capabilities.”¹⁰ Because of a fundamental of FID and SOF perform mainly as an advisor and instructor more than combatant the Joint Fires support is reduced to zero. Other factor is that SOF is usually conducting FID in areas which are out of Joint Fires range.

The fourth core task is Unconventional Warfare. “These are operations that involve a broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted through, with, or by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. When conducted independently, the primary focus of UW is on political-military objectives and psychological objectives. When UW operations support conventional military operations, the focus shifts to primarily military objectives; however the political and psychological implications remain.”¹¹ Based on UW fundamentals it can be discussed if Joint Fires can be used to support

such type of SOF operation. In generic situation the character of this operation is so limited to local activities therefore there is no need to support this core function with Joint Fires.

The fifth core task is Counterterrorism. "These are operations that include the offensive measures taken to prevent, deter, preempt, and respond to terrorism. SOF's role and additive capability is to conduct offensive measures within DOD's overall combating terrorism efforts. SOF conduct CT missions as special operations by covert, clandestine, or low visibility means. SOF's activities within CT include, but are not limited to, intelligence operations, attacks against terrorist networks and infrastructures, hostage rescue, recovery of sensitive material from terrorist organizations, and non-kinetic activities aimed at the ideologies or motivations that spawn terrorism."¹² According to definition those operations are mainly clandestine but if certain types of action are triggered and there is need for fire support the CAS would be most convenient option.

The sixth core task is Counterproliferation (CP) of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). "CP refers to actions taken to locate, seize, destroy, render safe, capture, or recover WMD. The core capabilities of CP include counterforce, active defense, passive defense, and consequence management. SOF focus on counterforce tasks and conduct CP missions as special operations by covert, clandestine, or low visibility means."¹³ This kind of operation is also focused on other support means than Joint Fires because they are rather preventive actions than combat actions or DA.

The seventh core task is Civil Affairs Operations. "These consist of Civil Affairs activities and other tasks conducted by Civil Affairs to support commanders conducting CMO."¹⁴ Those operations are focused to build up good relations with civilian and governmental

organizations therefore joint fires are not acceptable because all Joint Fires assets are designated to destroy rather than to build.

The eight core task is Psychological Operations. "These are planned operations that convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of PSYOP is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behaviors favorable to the JFC's objectives."¹⁵ PSYOP is the same case as civil affair operations. Those operations are focused on good relations building and should support JFC's objectives by peaceful and rather persuasive way. For this reason there is no use for Joint Fires assets.

In other words Joint Fires support only one third of SOF core tasks namely Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, and Counterterrorism, however under certain circumstances Joint Fires may be requested to support rest of core tasks.

Slightly different task which is not covered by core tasks but with many common features with them is Small-scale Counterinsurgency. "Those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by government to defeat insurgency."¹⁶ The military part of counterinsurgency is basically combination of a direct action, special reconnaissance and counterterrorism, for these reason Joint Fires would be called for support. Today's counterinsurgency operations are not only SOF domain but joint effort, it means that SOF operate closer to conventional units, therefore Joint Fires assets like artillery guns and mortars are more likely to support SOF operations than before. It will be more complicated to integrate supporting fires into maneuver due to joint character of operations.

Complexity of Joint Fires requesting and coordination process is created by joint character of actions and activities of several units within one operating area. It is in contrast with

purely SOF operation with its own operating area where request for supporting fires was question of coordination between SOF liaison element and conventional fire support cell. Only liaison element is not enough capacity to cover all requirements within this more demanding environment. “Adding joint fires elements (JFEs) to the structure of each special group ensures that special operators integrate all available assets into their operations.”¹⁷ To ensure effective exploitation of Joint Fires future capabilities must be defined.

Capabilities needed in the future operating environment to provide timely, accurate, and deconflicted Joint Fires supporting SOF operations should be based on lessons learned and successful efforts which proved that the concept is right and functional; “This Air Force element, known as the joint air component element, provided what Special Operations Forces lacked – the ability to plan and coordinate joint air fires.”¹⁸ Of course this example must be extended also to joint ground fires. Such elements should be integrated into SOF headquarters and together with conventional counterparts constantly exercise procedures and coordination measures needed for successful fire support mission. “future battlefield will require close coordination and deconfliction, and we – SOF and conventional forces of all services – must not overlook any aspect of fire support planning essential to preserving and enhancing the combat power of our joint and combined forces.”¹⁹

SOF headquarters should incorporate fire support elements which are equivalent in functions and level of expertise to conventional fire support elements, but still maintain flexibility and adaptability expected from SOF. This is achievable and it ensures incorporation of Joint Fires into deliberate operational and concept plans.

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Acronyms

CAO	Civil Affairs Operations
CAS	Close Air Support
CMO	Civil Military Operations
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CP	Counterproliferation
CT	Counterterrorism
DA	Direct Action
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
GMLRS	Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System
HIMARS	High Mobility Artillery Rocket System
JFC	Joint Force Commander
JTAC	Joint Terminal Attack Controller
ODA	Operational Detachment Alpha
PSYOP	Psychological Operation
SOF	Special Operation Force
SR	Special Reconnaissance
UW	Unconventional Warfare
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

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